

Building Blocks of Faith – Spirit  
I Cor. 2:10a-16; John 14:15-19  
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I thought it was only appropriate that on Halloween we talk about a ghost – not Casper the Friendly Ghost, not one of those ghoulies from “Scooby Doo,” but a ghost that we sing about every time we sing the Doxology: praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The irony of preaching about the Holy Spirit on Halloween is that, for some people, the Holy Spirit is scarier for them than any of the little ghosts that will be floating around at the Halloween party later today.

If I were to say, “Let’s talk about God,” most people would smile. “God is so good.” “God is my rock, my Creator.” People can put their arms around the concept of God. If I were to say, “Let’s talk about Jesus,” people would jump right in. “Jesus died on the cross.” “Jesus worked miracles.” We can put our arms around the concept of Jesus.

But I were to say, “Let’s talk a bit about the Holy Spirit,” what would you say? Where do you start? We know God (as best we can), we know Jesus, but that Holy Spirit...we just don’t know about the Spirit. For most of us, our primary biblical reference for the Holy Spirit is the story of Pentecost in Acts, when tongues of fire descend on the disciples and they start speaking in foreign languages. It’s a powerful story, and very intimidating when it comes to the Holy Spirit. When can embrace God, we can embrace Jesus, but how do you embrace a tongue of fire?

Part of understanding what the Spirit is is understanding its relationship to God and Jesus. Those three entities make up what we call the Trinity. Our denomination has always professed belief in the Holy Trinity, yet we tend to emphasize some parts more than others. Some churches tend to be Spirit-centered, and these churches usually have a charismatic style of worship, which can include different styles of music, more emotional expression by the congregation, and Spirit-filled manifestations like dancing, running, or speaking in tongues. For us, our sanctuary is dominated by a cross and our worship always includes communion. So our church, and the majority of the churches in our denomination, tends to be Christ-centered and focus on the work of God. This doesn’t mean we discount the role of the Spirit, but the Spirit tends to be the Cinderella of the Trinity: God and Jesus go to the ball, but the Spirit gets left behind.

Any distinction we try to draw between these three entities is artificial, because it’s impossible to totally separate the Spirit from God and Jesus. They all are, in essence, the same. Explaining the relationship of the Trinity is about like trying to explain why the sky is blue to a 3-year-old. I usually just end with “It just is...Hey, let’s go to McDonalds!” Here’s the best way I’ve heard it described: The basic compound that makes up water is H<sub>2</sub>O, two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. That compound can take three different forms: solid, liquid, and gas. Although it can take three very different forms, with three different functions, it is still the same substance, it is still H<sub>2</sub>O, whether it’s ice or water or steam. That’s the relationship of the Trinity. All three members are made up of the same divine essence, but each of them takes a different form and has a different function. Any questions? Good! You all want to go to McDonalds?

Another way to look at this relationship is to look at how each part of the Trinity is said to function in our life and in our faith. We think of God as our Creator, the one

who gave us life, the one who is in Heaven. Jesus is God made flesh, the one who came to earth and dwelt with us, saving us from our sins. And the Spirit is the one that is with us now, around us and within us, helping us carry out God's work. Now, this is an oversimplification, and not completely perfect, but you could say that God is above us, Jesus is among us, and the Spirit is with and within us. The Spirit stresses the presence and nearness of God. Another way to say it is that God is our Creator, Jesus is our Redeemer, and the Spirit is our Sustainer.

For a Christocentric church like ours to get a better understanding of the work of Holy Spirit, it might help us to look at the bigger picture of the Holy Spirit as painted throughout the whole Bible. The Bible has three main metaphors for describing the Spirit: fire, wind, and breath. Now, there are certainly many more than that, like the Spirit as a dove that descended on Jesus at his baptism. But these are the main three.

We see the metaphor of Spirit as fire in the Pentecost story. The prophet Isaiah warns the Israelites that God will cleanse them of their sins with a spirit of fire. John the Baptist tells his followers in Matthew that he baptizes them with water, but another is soon coming that will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This metaphor of fire implies that the Holy Spirit can refine us, like fire can refine a precious metal, burning away the impurities. The Holy Spirit as fire can also ignite us, set a spark within us, enflame our hearts with passion for God.

Another metaphor for the Spirit is wind. We see this in the very beginning of Genesis when God's spirit hovered over the waters during Creation. This is not a gentle breeze, this is a tree-bending gale. The Greek word used here is "pneuma." If you think of a pneumatic tube, like in bank drive-throughs, you know how it uses a forceful gust of air to transfer the canister from one place to another. Jesus also talks of the Spirit as wind in John 3 when he says to Nicodemus, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." The Spirit as wind is an unharnessed power, it is a wind of change that moves us from one place in our faith to another.

The final metaphor for the Spirit is breath. We first see this again in the beginning of Genesis, in 2:7: "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." The Spirit of God is life-giving, it is the very breath that we breathe. The Psalmist captured this sentiment when he wrote in Psalm 104, speaking of God's relationship to the Israelites, "When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." To breathe is to be created by God, to live by God's gift and God's grace given through the Holy Spirit.

Our breath is not the only gift given to us by God through the Spirit. In several of his letters Paul talks about how every believer possesses a spiritual gift given to us by the Holy Spirit. Some of these gifts include prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy, wisdom, miraculous powers, healing, and speaking in tongues. So every one of us in here possesses at least one of those gifts, and as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." In other words, you have been given a gift by the Spirit for the purpose of using it serve others.

So how do we, as a non-charismatic, non-Spirit-centered church, not only avoid being scared by the notion of the Holy Spirit, but step up and claim the Holy Spirit as a part of the Trinity and a part of our work in the church? How do we open ourselves to the Spirit's work in our lives and the life of this church?

I think the first thing we have to do, and something that may be the hardest thing for us to do, is to give up trying to control the Holy Spirit. The wind blows wherever it pleases, Jesus says. We will never be able to put our arms around the concept of the Holy Spirit. To fully embrace the Spirit is to open ourselves up to being refined, to being transformed, and to believing that the love of the Spirit is an inclusive and life-changing love that can neither be harnessed nor ignored.

Along with the biblical metaphors, we can look at our experiences to find other ways to understand the spirit. For me, the best modern-day metaphor for the Spirit comes from this definition: the Holy Spirit is the presence of divine creative energy in the life of a Christian. Where there is creativity, the Spirit is active and working. And I don't just mean creativity in an artistic sense, although that certainly is included. Some of us have sensed a closer connection with God through a piece of music, or a soul-stirring poem, or an arresting artwork.

But Spirit-inspired creativity occurs in other ways, as well. About 7 years ago, this church was trying to figure out how to make a successful transition from the pastorate of Nelson Irving into a new chapter. And you came up with this crazy idea of hiring an associate to work alongside Nelson for several years before moving into the senior pastor position. To my knowledge, no church had ever done that before! It was a most creative approach to the situation, and I believe it was nothing less than the work of the Spirit in this church.

That creativity continues in our programs like the Easter Egg Hunt and the Ministry Fair, in our support of outreach and mission work, in our educational and fellowship programs. The challenge for us is to continue to stay open to the work of the Spirit in our church. Remember, the Spirit's work is about giving life, it's about transformation. Interestingly, our vision statement says that, too: to be a thriving congregation that changes lives through Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the force around us and within us that lights a spark and inspires our creativity to serve God in new ways. As we stay open to Spirit in our lives, not only will our lives be changed, but the lives of everyone who comes into this thriving congregation. A poet once wrote, "Sure as the sound of leaves rustling lets you know the wind is there, like the smell of smoke lets you know there's fire, an ever-expanding circle of believers lets you know the Spirit is there."

Come, Holy Spirit, come.